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Five years after the global financial crisis, the economic outlook is brightening: growth is picking up in both developing countries and high-income economies. But inequalities and poverty persist in all countries. They remain universal afflictions. Over a billion people continue to live on less than $1.25 a day. Inequalities within and between countries are growing, thereby threatening economic development and poverty reduction efforts. Children are among the most vulnerable to the effects of poverty and inequalities. Investing in them – in particular in the most vulnerable – is a strategic way to build a brighter future for all, and for generations to come.

Eradicating extreme poverty starts with children

Poverty affects children the most – both in numbers and impact. Nearly half of the world’s extreme poor are children. The World Bank estimates that 569 million children under the age of 19 live on less than $1.25 a day. The monetary measure of extreme poverty compounds the multiple deprivations that most marginalized children experience. These children lack the most basic care and services they need to survive and thrive. They live in households that struggle to provide them with nutritious food, education, and basic health services. Such deprivations suffered during the early stages of life can cause irreparable damage to children’s minds and bodies.

Child poverty – in all its manifestations – damages not only childhoods, but also life opportunities. Evidence shows that children living in poverty are more likely to become impoverished adults and have poor children, creating and sustaining intergenerational cycles of poverty.

While the immediate costs of child poverty are borne directly by children themselves, society pays a high price through reduced productivity, untapped potential, and the costs of responding to chronic poverty and lower social cohesion. Child poverty harms us all.

To put it in the words of the UN Millennium Declaration, “As leaders, we have a duty to all the world’s people... in particular, the children of the world, to whom the future belongs.” Every child, in every society, has the right to a fair start in life. But addressing child poverty and deprivations is more than an issue of rights and of moral responsibility – it is also an issue of enlightened self-interest.

Investing in children is investing in the foundation of a sustainable world of progress

Today’s children are tomorrow’s teachers, innovators, environmentalists and peacemakers. The future of humanity, indeed the future of our planet, depends on giving them the best possible start in life – quality health care; nutrition and education; clean water and sanitation; protection from violence, abuse and exploitation; and a decent standard of living.
Investment in quality education for all creates entrepreneurs and a skilled workforce, and more thriving communities. Each additional year of schooling can increase GDP by 0.37 per cent and potential lifetime income by as much as 10 per cent. Learning outcomes are even more strongly correlated with a country’s economic growth: when an additional year of schooling is combined with improved learning outcomes, GDP goes up by 1 per cent. This is particularly true for girls. Progress on practically every development outcome – mortality declines, fertility declines, economic growth, democracy, and equity – is positively correlated with girls being educated.

Investment in good health and nutrition for children yields huge dividends in their development and later health care savings. Lives free of vaccine-preventable diseases, HIV/AIDS, stunting and polio are lives that do not burden future health care systems and have a greater chance to realize their full potential. Indeed, evidence shows that as much as 24 per cent of the economic growth in low- and middle-income countries between 2000 and 2011 resulted from health improvements, including from reductions in child and maternal mortality.

At the same time, progress is still insufficient to achieve our common child survival goal – Millennium Development Goal 4 (MDG4) – by 2015. In fact, if current trends persist, the goal will not be met globally until 2028. As a result, an additional 35 million children would die between 2015 and 2028. Committing to Child Survival: A Promise Renewed brings together governments, civil society and the private sector in a common cause to end preventable child deaths within a generation. Since the launch of this global movement in 2012, 177 governments have pledged to accelerate efforts to end preventable maternal, newborn and child deaths. Nearly 20 governments have already taken concrete steps to turn this pledge into action. From Brazil to Zambia, governments are sharpening national strategies for reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health (RMNCH), setting targets, and developing country-owned RMNCH scorecards to monitor and strengthen progress. Country-led action on maternal, newborn and child survival is reinforced and sustained by the countless civil society organizations that are mobilizing around national targets for RMNCH. By raising awareness of national targets and tracking their fulfillment, civil society is increasingly leading the way in demanding accountability for the political promises made on behalf of women and children.

Investment in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) can also generate significant human development and economic gains. Improved sanitation in developing countries yields an average of about $5.50 return for every $1 spent. For example, provision of proper basic sanitation facilities in schools leads to increased school attendance and higher literacy rates, particularly among girls. Higher levels of education in turn allow them to contribute more meaningfully to their communities and economies.

The Sanitation and Water for All Partnership recognizes both the moral and economic imperative of investing in water, sanitation and hygiene. During the third Sanitation and Water for All High Level Meeting held this week, finance ministers reported significant progress on over 400 commitments made in 2012. Results include strengthened institutions, greater capacity and increased WASH budgets. For example, Kenya increased its WASH budget by 30 per cent, and Senegal tripled its allocations to water, sanitation and hygiene. Over 50 countries and donors also made new commitments, emphasizing smarter investments focused on greater sustainability and equitable access to achieve the vision of water, sanitation and hygiene for all.

Global movements such as A Promise Renewed and Sanitation and Water for All bring governments, individuals, businesses, academics, civil society groups, international organizations and communities together to accelerate progress around specific issues. They have demonstrated results. In the words of World Bank President Jim Yong Kim, such movements “can produce solutions to problems that appear insurmountable.”
Equity-focused strategies for all children

For too long, equity and social spending have been seen as a dividend, rather than also a driver, of economic growth. Yet, a growing body of evidence shows that equity-focused strategies spur sustainable economic growth over the long term. IMF economists Berg and Ostry found that, globally, a 10 per cent decrease in inequality increases the expected length of an economic growth period by 50 per cent. Other recent studies point to the fact that measures to tackle inequalities – such as equitable investments in health and education – can be growth-inducing. As IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde recently emphasized, “[We need to] make sure that ‘inclusion’ is given as much weight as ‘growth’ in the design of policies. Yes, we need inclusive growth.”

In this context, the importance of investing in all children, equitably, cannot be overstated. We must bring to the forefront children with disabilities, of indigenous communities, girls, and children suffering in conflict zones. As is becoming increasingly clear, this will entail addressing the behavioural and social drivers of inequity, including adverse social norms that uphold or condone discrimination against children and across generations.

No group has had its rights compromised and potential neglected more consistently or more cruelly than children with disabilities. So often, children with disabilities receive the least of everything, last – the least healthcare and nutritious food, the least education and protective services. Last year’s State of the World’s Children report called on governments to keep their promises to guarantee the equal rights of all children – those living with and without disabilities. With all the challenges they confront, children with disabilities face yet another devastating blow when people impose limitations upon them and judge them through the lens of what they cannot do rather than what they can. Too often, the true disability is actually our inability to recognize their true talents.

Last September, governments and civil society from around the world came together to renew their pledge to invest in opening doors of opportunity for people with disabilities and to gather the data necessary to design and deliver the policies and programmes that can help us reach this goal. Commitments included making schools and workplaces more inclusive and accessible; providing equal access to health care and nutrition for all; and designing sanitation programmes and facilities that take into account the needs of people with disabilities — even, or especially, in emergencies.

Children are often the most vulnerable in humanitarian situations. Crises present a particularly difficult environment in which to live and grow up, depriving children of safety and of their dreams for the future. In major crises such as in the Syria region, South Sudan and Central African Republic, the threat of disease outbreaks looms, schools are being destroyed, children’s right to education is denied, and severe child rights violations escalate. Combined, these afflictions deprive children of their rights today while affecting their future and that of their countries over the long term.

After three years of conflict and turmoil, Syria is now one of the most dangerous places on earth to be a child. More than 5.5 million Syrian children now see their future besieged by war. Neighbouring nations and host communities are struggling to absorb the influx of refugees, with a direct impact on their own youngest citizens. The lives of millions of children are at risk due to increasing violence, rising malnutrition and risk of illnesses. At the same time, years of missed education and deepening psychological distress undermine children’s productive growth and their ability — and indeed willingness — as future leaders, to build a more peaceful, secure and stable Syria, for the benefit of all. Millions of young people risk becoming, in effect, a lost generation. We must avert this — and we still can. To succeed, we must capitalize on progress made this week on the Comprehensive Regional Strategy and the No Lost Generation initiative, and secure long-term support for rebuilding lives, communities and
institutions across the region. Accelerating our efforts to safeguard and invest in children of Syria and other conflict zones around the world represents our best chance to forge a better future for them, their countries and the world. If they are not going to grow up able and willing to heal the wounds of their nations, who will?

**Looking forward**

Building a more prosperous future for all children – in particular the most vulnerable – must be at the center of the global development agenda. Eradicating child poverty and deprivations is key to any progress humanity seeks to make. The post-2015 development agenda offers an historic opportunity — indeed a global responsibility — to get it right. Making equity a guiding principle of our efforts represents the best hope to reverse the downward spiral of inequality around the world and to instead set in motion an upward spiral of inclusive, sustainable growth and human development that benefits us all.